

Opening Statement

Chairman Bart Gordon (D-TN)
Committee on Science and Technology

Full Committee Hearing:
NASA's Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Request

February 13, 2008

Good morning and welcome Dr. Griffin. Today's hearing will be Congress's first opportunity to review the President's Fiscal Year 2009 NASA budget request.

I expect that there will be much in that budget request that Members will want to discuss today and in subsequent Committee hearings. Yet the FY 09 budget request is not just a collection of funding levels and program descriptions. Rather, it defines the Administration's priorities for NASA and its vision for what NASA should be doing in the coming years.

In that regard, this budget request—and Congress's disposition of it through the authorizing and appropriations process this year—will in large measure define the state of the space and aeronautics program that will be inherited by the next President. So the stakes are high.

As many of you know, this year marks the 50th anniversary of the dawn of the U.S. space program and the establishment of NASA. It also marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Science and Technology Committee. We—and NASA—were a direct result of the Soviet Sputnik launch, an event that sent shockwaves throughout the American government and the American public. In fact, our Committee was established in part to help define an appropriate American response to Sputnik and to oversee America's fledgling space program.

Now—50 years after NASA's birth—I think that this Committee needs to take a hard look at where NASA is headed, and whether or not the course that the current Administration has set NASA on is an appropriate one...and one that should be followed by the next Presidential Administration, whether it be Democratic or Republican. We need to develop a congressional consensus on what NASA should be doing, and equally importantly, on what level of resources we this nation is willing to commit to NASA.

I thought we had achieved such a consensus in the NASA Authorization Act of 2005, which was passed by Congress and signed by the President. Yet, the Administration's actions since that time unfortunately have not helped to maintain that consensus. In particular, I believe that the Administration has to date failed to provide resources to NASA that are adequate for what it has asked NASA to do and what it agreed to in the Authorization Act.

And that's not just my opinion—if you review our Committee's hearings over the past several years, you will find bipartisan expressions of concern over the mismatch between NASA's tasks and the resources it's been given. We see the impact of that approach to NASA throughout the budget request that we will be reviewing today. Thus, we see an aeronautics program that continues on a downward path, despite clear congressional direction that echoes our belief that NASA's aeronautics R&D activities are critical to our competitiveness, the safety and efficiency of our aviation system, and our quality of life—and despite clear evidence that our current air traffic control system is antiquated and under severe stress.

In the science arena, the situation is uncertain. The good news is that NASA has at last taken steps—consistent with congressional urging and direction—to initiate new Earth science missions recommended by the National Academies in its recent Decadal Survey.

The bad news is that the funding for those new Earth science missions doesn't reflect any new commitment on the part of the Administration to enhancing NASA's overall science program. Instead, funding for those missions will be provided by shifting money from other Earth science research activities as well as from other NASA science accounts in the coming years. In short—a “musical chairs” approach to science funding.

Yet, the successive cuts to NASA's aeronautics portfolio and the uncertain outlook for the NASA science program have not resulted in any corresponding dividends for NASA's human space flight program or its exploration initiative that could be cited as rationales for the Administration's approach to NASA. Quite

the opposite. In NASA's exploration program, the FY 09 budget request provides no funds to reduce the looming "gap" in U.S. human access to space once the Shuttle is retired, in spite of widespread concern about its potential impact. Indeed, given the low levels of reserves allocated to the Constellation program over the next several years, it is hard to have confidence even in NASA's stated 2015 delivery date for the Crew Exploration Vehicle—a date five years *after* the Shuttle is retired.

In addition, NASA's technology program—something that should be the bedrock of an R&D agency—has been progressively whittled away to the point it is largely an afterthought in the FY 09 budget request. And then there is the issue of the "parting gifts" left to the next Administration in the form of unfunded and underfunded requirements in the FY 09 NASA request.

For example, the five-year runout for the Shuttle program that accompanies the FY 09 request contains no money for Shuttle retirement and transition costs past 2010, even though NASA agrees that such funds will be required. Instead, any money needed for Shuttle retirement and transition costs will have to come out of the Exploration account—which itself will already be facing large new funding requirements in 2011 if the lunar program proceeds under NASA's planned schedule.

NASA's five-year budget contains no funding for the replacement of the Deep Space Network, even though NASA concedes it needs to happen if NASA is to have the capability to support all of the important space missions that will be occurring in the coming decades.

Finally, I am concerned that the Administration's five-year budget request does not appear to allocate sufficient funding to meet the International Space Station's utilization and operations requirements after the Shuttle is retired. Indeed, NASA itself identifies ISS cargo and crew transportation as "*the greatest program and budget risk*" to the ISS program.

I could go on, but I hope my point is clear.

NASA and its space and aeronautics research programs are important—important to our standing in the world, important to our nation's scientific and technological foundation, and important to our quality of life.

Dr. Griffin and his team are dedicated and hardworking and represent some of the "best and brightest" in the nation. Yet I am afraid that this budget and the vision for NASA that it represents fails them in several important ways:

It fails to fully exploit and nurture the impressive capabilities NASA has, and it fails to position NASA for a sustained and productive future. Instead I'm afraid that the Administration's budget and vision for NASA simply set the agency up for increased problems down the road.

And most fundamentally, I have to ask whether it is credible to believe that we will be able to successfully carry out the human lunar program proposed by the Administration—while still maintaining a balanced NASA portfolio overall—if the NASA budgetary outlook doesn't improve. If it *isn't* credible, then we will need to determine whether there are any changes to be made that will still keep us moving forward in a balanced manner under the funding likely to be available to NASA.

I hope that Dr. Griffin will help the Committee to address these issues both today and in the coming months. We need a sustainable and productive space and aeronautics program for America—one that can be embraced by the next President and the next Congress. And that's what I want us to focus on this year as we work to reauthorize NASA.

With that, I again want to welcome you to today's hearing, Dr. Griffin, and I look forward to your testimony.